

Insert Object, and Out Comes an Artful Replica

By HOLLAND COTTER

Sometimes — never often enough — there's magic in new art. You'll find a sweet, rude shot of it, at least until 10 tonight, at Leo Koenig in Chelsea, where the Vienna-based collective Gelitin is in residence. Over the past week, the group has turned the gallery into a sociable, raunchy, pixilated all-night version of Santa's workshop, pumping out free art on demand, and turning the image of a money-choked, object-clogged New York art world on its head.

Gelitin itself has remained all the while invisible. What you'll see while visiting Koenig, at 545 West 23rd Street, is a sealed, space-hogging wooden box, the size of a small house or a pre-1970's mainframe computer. It has two extensions; one like a cabinet, the other like a top-loading chest. You are invited to place an object, any object, into the chestlike extension. Close the hatch. A yellow light goes on. You hear a sliding sound and a clunk. Your item has temporarily disappeared into the big box, just as dozens of others have, including wallets, photographs, spe-

cially made items (artists have brought their own work) and, memorably, a 2-year-old child. (The daughter of another Koenig artist, Erik Parker, spent a few hours in the box, emerging delighted but respectfully mum about her experiences — the Gelitin team had sworn her to secrecy.)

Take a seat. Eventually — the wait can be from a few minutes to more than an hour — a light on the other extension goes on. Open the door, and you'll find your object joined by a brand-new, handmade "duplicate," or at least something that more or

less resembles the original. Both items will elicit admiring responses from the other people waiting their turn. And there always are people; the show has generated an avid community of shared interest. When the ooh's and aah's have subsided, you can take your new art home.

Like the art, the whole scene feels extremely laid-back, though for the

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Photographs by Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

At the "Tantamounter 24/7," the viewers' personal items inspire crafty replicas. Above, the original objects (left) and their "duplicates" (right). The Vienna-based collective Gelitin is the invisible force behind the installation at Leo Koenig in Chelsea. The show ends tonight at 10.

Insert an Object, and Out Comes Its Artful Duplicate

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elves inside the machine, it may be a different story. There are six: the four members of the Gelitin collective — Ali Janka, Florian Reither, Tobias Urban and Wolfgang Gantner — along with the Miami-based artist Naomi Fisher and a psychiatrist named Gabriel, last name unknown, who is presumably there to keep the workforce on an even keel.

Therapy would come in handy. The six people have been locked in together for a week. Although the windowless box is equipped with beds, a toilet, cooking facilities and food, it has no telephone, television, radio or computer, or any other means of contacting the outside world. The box-dwellers have no way of telling the time of day, or the day of the week.

They slave away around the clock. They laid in a hefty supply of traditional art materials (paper, paint, pencils, modeling clay and so on) and some two dozen cartons of junk, from scrap metal and feathers, to pornographic magazines and dolls. And there is their personal garbage, like product-packaging, used eating utensils, left-over food. Everything goes into the art they put out.

Gelitin, until recently spelled Gela-

tin, thrives on arduous conditions. Its members gained a certain notoriety in New York when, as part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's studio program in 2000, they secretly removed a window from the 91st floor of the World Trade Center and briefly installed an exterior balcony. (When the Port Authority learned of the project and freaked out, the members of Gelitin denied they had done it. The answer is still unclear.)

Their work encourages audience participation but sometimes requires the signing of no-fault waivers. For a show in Los Angeles, Gelitin created an elevator that was literally hand-operated, as several well-muscled guys hoisted intrepid passengers to the roof of a three-story building. For a show in Munich, visitors were asked to strip, lubricate themselves with baby oil and squirm down a narrow chute made from other human bodies.

The current project, the Tantamounter, is, of course, more modest. Some of the items coming out are fairly straightforward replications. An expensive camera goes in, and out comes a matching camera made from a cardboard box with a plastic foam cup for a lens and a handwritten Nikon label. Neat.

More often, the art imitates, comments on and even sends up, the original. I submitted my lunch, a clear plastic container of sushi with chopsticks. I got back a similar container with a careful arrangement of broken eggshells filled with lime rinds and sprinkled with wet tea leaves. I accepted this as a pungent and ephemeral little garbage bouquet, though it could also have been a garbage way of saying, "We find sushi revolting."

The enchantment of most of Gelitin's output lies in the ingenuity and wit of its improvised details. But it is the performance part — the fact that real but unseen people are just a few feet away making these things — that gives the show its magnetism. The aesthetic of generosity is infectious. It inspires some nice responses.

A young British artist who had heard about the show came to the gallery by subway en route to the airport for his flight home. He quickly took off all his clothes and put them in the bin for processing. The turnaround period turned out to be unusually long; the time for his flight was near. All the other people hanging out in the waiting area chipped in cash so he could take a cab to the airport. Their gift bought him time to

retrieve his clothes, and the scroll-like, labor-intensive, item-by-item drawing that accompanied them.

The Koenig installation throws a spotlight on collectivity as an alternative model for how to make art and live a life. It's a model that always seems to be on the verge of taking hold and never quite does. So much in American market culture, which is also art culture, is ranged against it. Yet Gelitin has managed to turn mainstream spaces into alternative, experimental spaces just by occupying them, the way a band can claim and change a space with music.

That said, the Tantamounter is winding down. Tonight production will cease, the big wooden box will be opened, and its workers released. Their empty quarters will be on view in the gallery for a few weeks more, but only as a relic of a different kind of show, one that for seven days gave precedence to giving over getting, mobility over fixity, imagination over polish, and collective over personal identity. True, the show was photographed every step of the way, inside and outside the box, and there will be a book. But to get the magic, you had to be there. Magic works that way. That's one reason it's rare.